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SUBJECT: LABOUR WINS RACE FOR HELEN CLARK'S OLD SEAT

[1](#)1. (SBU) Summary. On June 13, the Labour Party's David Shearer easily won the by-election contest for the Mt. Albert seat in Auckland, recently vacated by former Prime Minister Helen Clark. Shearer, a former high ranking UN official, effortlessly defeated his nearest rival, the governing National Party's candidate Melissa Lee who was widely considered to have run a poor campaign. The victory served as a timely boost for the opposition Labour Party and its leader Phil Goff. PM John Key came under criticism for his perceived lack of support for his candidate as she struggled throughout her campaign. The race and the candidates were subjected to uncommon levels of media scrutiny for a by-election even though the result will not affect the political and power dynamics of the country. End Summary.

Labour Easily Retains Helen Clark's Old Seat

[1](#)2. (SBU) The June 13 Mt Albert by-election contest to fill the vacancy left by former Prime Minister Helen Clark's departure from parliament to head the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) was easily won by Labour's David Shearer. His victory meant that Labour's 63-year unbroken winning streak in the electorate remained intact. Since 1981 Clark held the seat with little serious challenge. The fact that it was Clark's old seat generated unprecedented levels of media interest and scrutiny in a race that would not impact on the balance of power in Parliament.

Former UN Official Lays Waste to Field

[1](#)3. (SBU) The Labour Party candidate David Shearer, until recently the leading UNDP official in Iraq, decimated the field in winning the Mt. Albert by-election. His majority was a massive 9187 votes. Shearer captured 63.1 percent of the final vote with his nearest competitor, the governing National Party's gaffe-prone candidate Melissa Lee, only getting 17.1 percent just ahead of the Green Party co-leader Dr. Russel Norman on 12 percent. [Note. Lee is already a MP courtesy of her position on National's party list and despite her loss in Mt. Albert will remain in Parliament. End Note]. Before heading to UNDP, Shearer had earlier served as a staffer to Phil Goff and run twice unsuccessfully for election to Parliament.

[1](#)4. (SBU) Shearer's majority fell just short of Helen's Clark's at the November 2008 General Election, although the party vote in the electorate in November was much closer between Labour and National. This translates into Clark being more popular in her electorate than her party. Shearer, as it turned out, appeared just as popular as his predecessor. [Note. As opposed to NZ general elections, by-elections only require one vote - for the candidate - and not an additional vote for the party of choice. End Note].

Reasons for Labour's Big Win

[1](#)5. (SBU) The fact that Mt. Albert is one of Labour's safest seats,

with well organized and sophisticated party machinery already in place, allowed Shearer a considerable head-start on his opponents. Shearer himself proved to be a disciplined and capable campaigner. The same could not be said, however, of his closest rival, Lee. Despite being previously touted as a rising star in New Zealand politics, Lee's performance in the campaign was regarded by observers as the worst seen in recent years. It was quickly clear that she lacked the essentially political skills and acumen needed to win a political contest. However, she was not helped by a perceived lack of support from her party, particularly with regard to a couple of Government announcements made midway through the campaign which set back her party's popularity with Mt. Albert voters. Ultimately the formula for success for Shearer was simple: remain gaffe-free, have a high visibility in the electorate and stay on the popular side of local issues important with Mt. Albert voters. Shearer fulfilled these requirements adeptly, whereas Lee roundly didn't. Additionally, Shearer benefited from Norman's inability to siphon left-of-center votes away from Labour.

Victory is Much Needed Boost for Labour

¶6. (SBU) Shearer's victory was much needed tonic for the flat and struggling Labour Party. Beset by bad polling since being removed from power and finding it difficult to re-connect with voters, Labour had much to lose and everything to gain. Defeat would have been nothing short of a disastrous for Labour. It would've served as a crushing blow to party morale in the wake of its 2008 election defeat. Defeat also would've signaled that its efforts to re-engage

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with the electorate since the 2008 loss have failed. Losing Mt. Albert would've given rise to unavoidable questions about Phil Goff's leadership from voters, and most likely from within his party. Even prevailing with a significantly-reduced majority would have been of cold-comfort to Labour. Luckily for Goff and his party, none of these came to pass and Labour emerged buoyed by its first genuine political success since the 2008 election loss eight months ago.

Outcome Also Important for National

¶7. (SBU) Taking Helen Clark's old seat off Labour was always going to be a tall order for National, a challenge recognized by political analysts and PM Key alike. Nonetheless, the result in June 13 was somewhat humiliating for National. In the lead-up to official campaigning, National has sensed that it could be competitive due the relatively close party vote in Mt. Albert at the 2008 general election and National's subsequent popularity with voters nation-wide. It also had high hopes for its candidate.

¶8. (SBU) National was also mindful that Labour would portray a loss as the end of National's long honeymoon with the voters. Additionally, National would be concerned that its opponent was interpreting a National loss as a rejection of the Government's two controversial plans for Auckland: the extension of overland highway development in and around Auckland (and through Mt. Albert) and an overhaul of the city's regional governing structure.

Key's Actions during Campaign Criticized

¶9. (SBU) PM Key came under fire from political analysts for his role, or lack thereof, in Melissa Lee's failed campaign. The timing of a mid-campaign Government announcement of a controversial highway extension via Mt. Albert caused near terminal damage to Lee's campaign hopes. The fact that she has not briefed on the announcement beforehand astonished the watching media. The media also criticized Key's near absence from the campaign trail and total absence on election night. There was, analysts determined, a palpable sense that Key had deserted his candidate. Goff, on the other hand, was lock-step with Shearer throughout the race.

¶10. (SBU) Key personally hand-picked Lee for her high place on the party list before the 2008 election. This virtually assured her of a place in Parliament. In doing so, Lee bypassed the normal due

diligence in the candidate selection process. Critics argued that Lee's campaign showed that Key's erred in his judgment of her abilities and if she were properly held to scrutiny beforehand, National would've avoided much of the ensuing embarrassment that she earned for her party.

Comment - Dramatic But Unimportant

11. (SBU) The Mt. Albert result should not dramatically alter the national political landscape nor will it alter, in any way, the political balance of power within Parliament. It may contribute, among other problems facing the Government, to a backsliding of the National-led Government's and John Key's popularity to the benefit of Labour and Phil Goff, but not likely in a meaningful way. National will be relieved the Mt. Albert campaign is over and will try to quickly seize back control of the political agenda it has lost in recent weeks. The winners to emerge out of the Mt. Albert result are Goff, who is handed a respite from questions about his leadership, and Shearer, who some pundits already tout as a future Labour leader, though prematurely. The losers are certainly Lee, whose political prospects are now far from assured, and the Greens' Norman who failed in his only objective to raise his profile and challenge for the left-of-center vote. End Comment.
KEEGAN